Better Guidance for the Individual

"INDIVIDUAL differences" is one of the favorite concepts in American education. This seems to be the primary basis for the pleas for individualization of instruction, and also the cornerstone of school counseling. While stressing the uniqueness of individuals in abstract, actual school practices have nevertheless tended to pay only a left-handed compliment to the concept by basing their group-oriented activities upon similarities among pupils.

Of course, "uniqueness does not imply that nothing is shared with other individuals, only that not everything is common to them," and it is readily understandable that most schooling procedures have been designed to satisfy the alleged common core of humanity with the least amount of efforts or expenses. This familiar idea of economy is flanked by an equally intelligible quest for reproducibility in human phenomena. Certainly, the argument runs, no social organi-

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5 Communality in basic characteristics is not antithetical to uniqueness in the combination of these characteristics. Thus, assuming that human variability is normal in distribution on most dimensions and also that only five percent of the population is sufficiently different on any single dimension from the rest to be regarded as unique, it may be shown that 10 percent can be called unique when two dimensions are taken into consideration, and 40 percent is unique if 10 dimensions are involved. The proportion rises to 99.5 percent by the time 100 dimensions are simultaneously considered. See: Roger J. Williams. Biochemical Individuality. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1956.

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zation can be maintained on the basis of the irregular and unexpected in man. The efforts of professional educators have therefore concentrated upon making pupil actions more predictable and, hence, learners as a group more teachable.

In view of this, it comes as no surprise that many familiar institutional practices try to accommodate differences among students by curtailing the range of such variations while keeping the curriculum more or less common. Age grading, acceleration, non-promotion, and ability/achievement grouping (single or multiple stream) are obvious examples. Compensatory efforts, if successful, come to a similar end by ensuring a common minimum level of performance in those completing the program. Further, students are differentiated on the basis of summative evaluation (grade-point averages, achievement test scores, etc.) and distributed, at each successive transition point, among various occupational tracks and institutional types, to give reasonably homogeneous subgroups.

In other cases, attempts are made to provide for individual differences by offering a number of alternative combinations in learner-teacher (for example, multi-section, multi-instructor courses; team teaching; tutorials; and computer assisted instruction) or learner-curriculum (for example, electives; enrichment; self-initiated learning; modular scheduling; and nongraded) interaction.

The extent of success of any of these practices is naturally contingent upon many intra- and extra-school factors, not the least of which is our handling of time and space. The where, when, and how long of schooling are highly dependent upon the general societal definition of these concepts, and it is not likely that the child’s “learning space” (after Kurt Lewin’s “life space”) is allowed to expand beyond the implicit cultural limits.

This often means that the alleged availability of options gives little more than an illusory choice. A recent example is the acceptance of the pass-fail grading system by many colleges with an accompanying stipulation that it may not be used in students’ major areas, or the push for finer discrimination after the adoption of satisfactory-unsatisfactory grading system. In both instances, the form is there but the spirit is no more; and, unfortunately, that is frequently the fate of these provisions to take care of variations among individuals.

This disheartening state of affairs is also observable in school counseling, which is ideally based upon guidance, “a point of view with regard to the individualization of the student’s educational experience.” The actual work of a school counselor is often undermined by his well-intended creations turning into self-perpetuating monsters. The worthy concern about individual vocational development has given rise to some oversimplified matching operations between jobs and people, both being interpreted in static terms. The useful psycho-educational measurement movement has turned into a “cult of numerology,” pigeonholing human beings and reducing them to single-dimensional existence.

Counseling on matters of academic progress has often transformed itself into an operation of social judgment and status.


ascription. The counselor's functions in the (so-called) "more personal" realms of clients' life have been marred by a crisis-oriented, remedial emphasis, cause-hunting inclination, and preoccupation with technical effectiveness. Finally, the efforts of counseling personnel to enhance their professional prestige have typically resulted in more social distance, rather than less, between counselors and the rest of the school staff, notably teachers.

Where Do We Go from Here?

The fact that a tool can be easily mishandled may not be a good reason for its immediate and total rejection. Certainly, some of the aforementioned practices can serve the purpose of individualized education with further refinements. It nevertheless appears that some changes in perspective are called for if the attainment of this goal is to be facilitated through the institution of schooling. It is true that a large share of the educational profession's effort has been de-


For many of us, it is a bitter experience to be reminded that we are not to be the prima donna, and not to occupy the center ring. “How continuously on the watch we must be in order not to help too much, not to help to the point of interfering where we are neither wanted nor needed!” The responsibility for what life expects of a person is ultimately and undisputably his, and his alone. Genuine choices he must be given, and mistakes he must be allowed to make. It is he who must reach a decision, and it is he who must suffer the consequences. By trying to chart a man’s course of life, and to regulate its rhythm for him with precision, the helping profession may in fact be working against him.

Human history has repeatedly shown that assimilation of a foreign culture by a people works best when it is not forced. The “greatest and most durable culture change has come about as a result of coercion, but of being present with a cultural model which they [the people] were free to accept or reject.” The cultural model there must be, viable and authentic, because that permits the student a glimpse of what is worth conserving in what is, and also of what is worth wanting beyond what is. The young cannot test their styles of learning and growing against adults who are not themselves currently engaged in striving for a vision of mature life.

While we worry about the utility and efficiency of our operations, while we project into the future by screening, credentialing, and placing individuals merely to fit the present social order, and while we are intent on squeezing the expanding knowledge into school curriculum, we may be “losing that teaching which is the most important one for human development: the teaching which can only be given by the simple presence of a mature, loving person.”

In the days ahead, the education professionals must work far better with each other than ever before, if they are to serve as a catalyst to “the many possibilities to make our youth familiar with living and historical personalities who show what human beings can achieve as human beings.” Better guidance for individual students is impossible so long as guides are acting individually at cross-purposes. The teacher, teacher’s aide, counselor, administrator, and perhaps a new type of professional whom I would call monitor must work closely as a team to sustain and enhance “the many possibilities” Fromm speaks of.

The monitor is the classroom-based helper and troubleshooter who combines, to a certain extent, the group- and cognitive-oriented concerns of the teacher and the individual and affective orientation of the counselor. He is the one carefully chosen for his easy interpersonal style, high tolerance of ambiguity, and flexibility in thought and action. He is the one prepared for serving learners in such diverse capacities as a tutor, group coordinator, participant observer, confidant, roving ambassador (ombudsman), and the like. He is there in the classroom as a resident learner’s aide and a helper of other helpers. Some mature students will readily meet the requirements, and so also will some school personnel who function better in fluid, informal settings than in more structured contexts of the traditional sort.